

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Sin is an annoyance, a speck in our eyes that must be rubbed away. For heaven's sake, we don't want to talk about it, it's annoying that Lent is here and we are reminded about that word again. Being reminded that sin still exists in each one of us, can be just plain annoying, not earth shattering, nothing really to worry about, it's just there hovering around the edges, picking at us, especially during Lent.

We have forty long days to think about it though. Forty long days when we're reminded to repent, and be saved. Our hymns are melancholy. In many churches, the word "Alleluia" will not be uttered from Ash Wednesday until Easter Day.

Is that what Lent is all about? A surface look at it, a few memories from Sunday school in our youth, a desire to get it over with and get back to the real world, might make it so. But look at our readings today. If we really pay attention to what we're hearing, there is a whole lot more light than darkness, a whole lot more grace poured on us by our God, than punishment. Yes, we're reminded about the temptations of sin, but we're offered the continuous gift of forgiveness, and a chance to model Jesus. Lent can help us go deep into ourselves and take stock of our lives.

Moses' story today is full of light. God has given the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey. All they have to do is show gratitude through their offerings. "A land flowing with milk and

honey” is an image of peace and beauty. The people acknowledged their rescue from the Egyptians by the God who heard their cries of affliction.

Today’s psalm says, “He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I am with him in trouble; I will rescue him and bring him to honor”. This is another image that should remind us that God continues to hear our cries, even when they’re moaned from the depths of our sinfulness. At the beginning of Lent, we’re reminded that we are not alone. God not only has not abandoned us, God is “so bound to us in love” the psalm says, that even when we are focused only on ourselves, to the point of sin, God is with us, ready to bring us back to the light.

St. Paul says the same thing to the Romans. “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart”. That is not only the word of faith, but the capital W, “Word” of God. “You will be saved,” he says, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved”. Is there any better news than that?

St Paul does put in front of us, however, one type of sin we may need to think about during Lent, because after all, this good news of salvation depends upon the fact that we actually want to repent and return to the Lord. Paul drops in a very important fact: There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all, and is generous to all who call on Him. This speaks to us of God’s inclusion of all people, no exceptions. We might need to examine ourselves to determine how much we really want to include all others.

We have all heard the saying: “Remove the log from your own eye before you try to remove the spec from someone else’s eye”.

We might need help getting that log out of our own eye first.

We might need to read over and over again, Jesus’ words all through the Gospels, that call us to love even our enemies.

Really, love our enemies, those people we totally dislike and can't bear to be in their presence. It's hard enough to love people we like, and even our own families sometimes.

But if that "log" is left in our eye, it could fester and make us blind to our responsibility to share God's love with everyone.

This is a good time to remember, that for the Jews, "love" doesn't mean the Valentine's Day card emotional kind of love.

Love, when Jesus talks about it, also means "loyalty". We don't have to agree with everyone to love them. We don't have to have emotional love for the person, or group doing evil.

"Loyalty" means we acknowledge that they, too, are children of God, and need our prayers. They need us to want them to see the light, not for us to judge them as worthy only for hell.

Even Jesus didn't send his tempter, the Devil, immediately to hell in our Gospel story. Isn't it interesting that Jesus only responds to the temptations by reminding His tempter that God, alone, is worthy of our worship and service? There was no argument, no discussion: God alone is our refuge and our stronghold in times of trial.

The three temptations are interesting in themselves. Would it have been so wrong if Jesus just turned a few stones to bread?

Certainly, there's no sin in that. What is Luke really telling us?

Perhaps, that we might be tempted to want to manipulate the world to our liking. That can grow into the serious sin, for example, of not caring where our food comes from, or the environment from which it grew. Do we care enough about those who grow the food we eventually buy in our stores, to make deliberate choices about where we shop?

Jesus' second temptation might make us think about what we feel we must own. What in our lifestyles comes before our consideration of God? If we're honest, many things can draw

our eyes away from God, things that, in and of themselves, are not bad, but things, such as that annoying speck of ash that fell in our eyes, that might fester in us until we can see nothing else. The Gospel reminds us that Jesus, too, was faced with temptations. He was, after all, fully human, as well as fully divine. He knows what we face. He knows the power that tries to turn our hearts from God. The ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us of the same thing, but today we hear about God's great love for us. We're reminded even more about the fact that we abide under the shadow of the Almighty. We, too, have been promised a land flowing with milk and honey. There is a lot to be joyful about in Lent. After all, Paul tells us, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved".

AMEN.